

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church

The Fourth Sunday of Lent: March 30, 2025

Honor and Shame

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on the fourth Sunday of Lent. Today we have one of the most popular parables in the Bible; its simple presentation makes it very understandable. However, today I would like to share this story in a bit more detail from a perspective maybe a little less familiar than our own.

Niveen Sarras is a Lutheran pastor and preacher who comes from a Palestinian Christian background. She was born and raised in Bethlehem and has a viewpoint that focuses on the shame-honor culture as the context of Jesus' who and why for this story.

Shame-honor culture per Niveen is dominant even in modern Palestine as much as it was dominant in the first-century. She feels this story with that background will demonstrate even more deeply that the main point in the parable is God's unconditional love.

Jesus begins his parable with the younger son asking his father for an advance on his inheritance. In Jesus' shame-honor culture and in Niveen's, asking a living parent for an early inheritance is just down right rude. Biblical scholar N. T. Wright explains that "asking for his share before the father's death; was the equivalent of saying 'I wish you were dead.'"

Children who make such a request lose respect and honor, not only from their immediate family but also from their community which will then ostracize them. The parent's response to their children's request is usually a wave of great anger. Niveen admits she has even in her lifetime encountered a few cases when parents and children will cut all their ties with each other because of such an insulting request.

Contrary to all expectations, the loving father agrees to divide the property between his two sons. Knowing the culturally shaming background, Jesus' audience must have been shocked by the father and his younger son's actions. No one should do such a thing. But in the case of God, he often gives us what we desire – even though it may lead us away from him.

It then takes the younger son a few days to gather everything he inherited and travel to a foreign country. It seems he was the one who wanted to cut all familial ties.

The younger son wastes his money in dissolute living, and when famine hits the country, he becomes hungry and hires himself out to one of the citizens to feed pigs. From Jesus' audience's point of view, the younger son has now shamed his father by reducing his status from being a son of a large landowner to an unclean man feeding pigs.

The younger son then becomes miserable until he "came to himself," meaning he came to his senses and eventually repented. He, as Joel B. Green states, recognizes "his loss of status, and the deteriorating social condition that developed from his series of actions."

Returning home as a failure, in this culture of shame-honor, means a person is not well received in failure. In Jesus' culture and in Niveen's even today, one would travel to a different country to work hard and succeed. If one returns home unsuccessful, he/she embarrasses their family. In Niveen's culture, the word "fail" connotes shame and embarrassment. However, the younger son returns to his father and is ready to suffer the consequences of his actions.

"But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him." Wright rightly explains that "in a culture where senior figures are far too dignified to run anywhere, this man takes to his heels as soon as he sees his young son dragging himself home." Niveen writes, "I do not remember ever seeing my late father running. It is also very unusual for senior women to run."

The loving father is thrilled to see his son. He ignores his cultural norms and runs to welcome, embrace, and kiss his son before the son can apologize. After the son's apology, the loving father orders his servants to clothe his son with the best robe, put a ring on his finger, and sandals on his feet.

The prodigal and unconditional love of the father covers the filthy son with honor and love. He also orders his servants to prepare a fatted calf to celebrate his son who "was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate." The father's order is not an accepted way to act in shame-honor culture because they do not celebrate an unsuccessful person. The prodigal and unconditional love of the father goes against all his cultural expectations.

Jesus talks about the elder son who is angry because his father killed the fatted calf, which is kept for important events such as weddings, to celebrate his younger son. He refuses to attend the celebration, distancing himself from his family. His father leaves the party to plead with him, but the elder son argues with him and describes himself as a slave to his father.

It is possible the elder son assumes that anything the father spends on his younger son will come out of his own inheritance. The father responds with kindness by assuring his son, “you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found”. We are left wondering if now the eldest son will return.

Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God. His message was about a God whose love surpasses all typical expressions known to humanity. That love is celebrated by those who apprehend it in the gospel of Jesus, as illustrated in the scene of celebration after the homecoming of the younger son.

Yet, there will always be those who are guarding themselves from the experience of an all-loving God. Like the elder son, they maybe leery of such unconditional love and feel that God’s love must be earned, therefore perpetuating the shame-honor system.

Jesus’ telling of this story is shocking to his hearers. And even though we do not live in a culturally shame vs honor society as a whole anymore, many of us still do on a personal level. We may ostracize ourselves from family, community or even church when we believe we are unlovable.

Wherever you are on your journey, whether it be feeling like a failure, or maybe the steadfast one who holds all together, we are reminded today that God is there for us, if only we return home to him. Amen